

## Coming Into Community



A Sermon by **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**  
*Universalist Unitarian Church of Santa Paula*  
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There is a story of coming into community. It is written by Wendell Berry about a man named Jayber Crow, who is born in the Kentucky river valley, where small and even smaller towns have existed for what seems like forever, and where the river connects all into community. Jayber is very young when both his parents die, so young that his only memories of them are snippets, his mother sewing near a fire, his father working with tools in the barn. In the way of small towns, of communities grounded in land and place, a distant relative who lives down-river a bit, hears of his orphanhood. Though she is old enough to be a grandmother to the small boy, right away she comes up-river to fetch him .

When he is very old Jayber remembers how it was that day:

“ And then an old woman I knew as Aunt Cordie gathered me up without asking and sat down in the rocking chair and held me and let me cry. She had on a black dress that reached to her shoetops and a black hat with little white and blue flowers on it there in the dead of winter. I can remember how she seemed to be trying to enclose me entirely in her arms.” Turning to her husband of forty years she said, ‘God love his heart! We’re going to take him home.’<sup>1</sup>”

And so it is that Jayber finds a new family, still within the community of the river valley where he was born. He lives happily for some years of his boyhood, learning the land and the people and the life. But his aunt and

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 2000) p. 14.

uncle are old, and when Jayber is ten, death takes them too, leaving him to note many years later, that already he was the survivor of two stories that had completely ended, there alongside the river in the valley of his birth.

The orphanage Jayber is sent to live in is run by the church, in the central part of the state, a place that to this boy of the river-lands feels like another world in another time. It is not a bad place, but it is an institution, a world closed unto itself. In it, far from all he has ever known, Jayber closes too. For all of his years there he opens up to no true friendship. At age 18, Jayber hears, or thinks he hears, perhaps because the church runs the orphanage, the call to ministry. He tries seminary, but it is no home for him, and in it he grows even more closed off and inaccessible. He leaves and moves into a town larger than any he has known, where people live in anonymity, something which suits him, for a while. He learns to be a barber here, a trade that will serve him well. Trusting no one, not even a bank, he keeps his earnings close, always with him, hiding cash in his clothes and shoes. At last, growing aware finally of his aloneness and of his separation, though he knows not from what, he sets out again.

Something in his memory – a story of a place and time where the river flowed through the land and hearts of men and women and children who were connected by it, connected and made larger than any one of them alone

– something of this sensory and distant memory calls Jayber back to the land where he was born, even though he has no family there, not anymore. Jayber has learned the ways of the world, though, his trust in the goodness of people and life broken. So when he sets off, he does so alone. Carrying only essentials, not quite sure of the direction, but pulled by a force so strong he can only yield to it, he sets out on foot for the valley of his childhood where the towns cluster along the river in a swath of human togetherness that (though he cannot quite hear the words) beckons him *come home*.

In the way of true quests, his journey is hard. The days are long, the nights black and violent, as rain and thunder and floods threaten to destroy him, and he loses his way again and again. His journey home is a crucible, as are many of our great transitions in life, something we have to endure, and endure alone. Jayber does not see or even imagine a better future, only sees ahead in snippets, like those broken memories of his mother and father: a turn of the river that he recognizes, an old farm he remembers, and the closer he comes to that river valley, a familiarity that fills him with longing, and makes an old fear and desire rise in his throat like bile.

Finally, soaked and resigned, Jayber sees a lake that he knows, and he realizes he is almost there. On the water in a boat he sees a man whose face he recognizes. The man takes him on board, takes him across the water to

shore, to the land where he was born. In the way of all true homecomings, possibility lies as the end, and the need to relinquish some of his utter self-sufficiency . Turns out the town needs a barber. Jayber, who has lived apart from all others, had no community for well more than half his life, is being invited back in. The shop's owner says it clear and outright, that for one hundred dollars down, Jayber can buy that store. He can belong. Jayber describes what happens:

When (the owner) had finished the room was quiet. You will appreciate the tenderness of my situation if I remind you that I had managed to live for years without being known to anybody. And that day two men who knew me and where I had come from had looked at me face-on as I had not been looked at since I was a child. And now I sat with about a hundred and twenty dollars in bills in my shoe....

I was not, as they say, mentally prepared. My face turned red to the eyeballs – I could feel the heat radiating from it. Both men were watching me ...

'I'll take it, I said... I took off my overshoe and shoe and got (the money). I laid a fifty-dollar bill and two twenties and a ten on the table in front of (them).

It was a funny moment; a time would come when even I would think so. But that day it was hard. I felt revealed, as if to buy the shop I had had to take off all my clothes. But (the men) never allowed the least twitch or touch of amusement to show even in their eyes. They sat there as if not a man in (that town) had ever paid for anything without taking off his shoes.<sup>2</sup>

Some of us, I think, come into community easily, handily, as if we have been doing it our whole lives. For some of us, this is how it is. For those of us lucky enough to have always had the embrace of community ---

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 2000) p.102

of family, of friends, of the surround of love – to come into community is but to carry on an easy habit of offering ourselves to others with trust and faith in the human way of redemption.

But for many of us, those hurt by the world, hurt in ways that out of our very humanness we cannot fully avoid – the ways of sorrow and loss and heart-break – for us, to come into community can require something more, something not too far off from that feeling of being revealed, undressed, not so very different from showing to others that, truth be told, our shoes seem to us the best place to keep what matters.

For many of us, it can be hard to let people know us, to let them see the ways and places that we are imperfect or where we have been broken by the world. It is hard because so often, we have kept those broken places far away from sight, knowing only to ourselves that they were there, not willing to expose these deepest expressions of human life to the same world that caused them, as if to do so would break us again.

But we come into community, anyway, some of us. We do it because, like Jayber Crow, an invisible force draws us, and the memory of a life when we were surrounded by people who knew us and loved us anyway rises like the water on the river when the full snow melts. We come into community because we have to. Even if we go alone, in the dark, and in the storm, with

everything we care about held tight to our body, we feel that power of another way of life drawing us back, back to a place we thought we never knew or would know again: home.

We come into community when we arrive, when our boat, like Jayber's, lands on that shore. We come into community when, despite having kept ourselves separate for so long, we look up and realize that we are no longer alone. We come into community when, against a fear as old as death, we decide to share who we are, to give up what we thought we could never let go of, like taking bills clean out of our shoes.

In some ways, my story is the same as Jayber Crow's. In some ways, all our stories are. When my twin sister died, my world started to spin and I hardly knew where I stood. I moved by rote, as many of us do in such times. First, I went to be with my father, because I knew he needed me. I decided early on not to have a memorial. Though I loved my twin with all my life and heart, though our very genes were identical, I did not see how we could have a service. During her last years, though she was only 44 when she died, for reasons of circumstance, she had alienated so many people I feared that no one would come. And while I could have stood that, I knew that my father might be broken by such a sight, broken in a way that might never heal. I couldn't do that to him.

When I told my daughters, 6 and 10, that we weren't having a service, and one of them, who was 10 at the time, took me to task: "Mom", she said. "We can't *not* have a memorial service for Auntie. That is what our church does when people die. We get together, we sing, we listen to people talk about her, and we remember. It's what our church is there for, mom. Don't you remember?"

Of course she was right. And, seeing now, that this was my task, my world started to spin again, with all that there was to do, with no one but me to do it. But, putting one foot in front of the other as we do at such times, I placed a call to my church. Now I'd been a member there for a long time, given years of volunteer time, but I'd never had to ask for much from them. Thus began for me a new way of coming into community.

I called our church secretary. I called her, and in that way that happens when we hold a loss inside because it holds us together, as soon as I spoke the words, *my twin has died*, the tears began and then I could no longer speak. And that dear woman, to whom I am eternally grateful, just took charge then. Waiting until I had quieted enough to hear, she listed what needed to be done: reserve the room, arrange for music, childcare, flowers, food, and more. She just kept saying, "We'll do that. We'll take care of that for you." For music, she said, with a certainty that shushed any questions or

resistance I might have, “Mahlon will be there” she said. Mahlon was the church organist, who I’d known well and long, because of all my work with worship services as a lay person, but who I’d never imagined playing at my twin’s memorial service. But it was done, decided. “You’ll want to record the service,” she said, “so your daughters, you and your sister’s son can remember.... Mack Stanton”, she noted with confidence, (the man in our church who knew about audio and visual equipment) “He will do that. He’ll want to do that for you.”

And so it was that I crossed my own lake of learning again how to let people in, learning how to receive. For ten days, the time between my twin’s death and the service, I did not cook a meal. Other people took care of my children. Every day cards and small gifts arrived like manna from heaven, a completely unearned blessing from the gods who walk in human form on this earth. At the service, which I had feared would be empty, nearly 200 people filled the pews. I was glad for my father. Many of the people there were from my church, and had never even met my sister. But, I understand now, they came for me. They came to help share the terrible loss that had happened to me, so it wasn’t mine alone. For all the days of my life, I will remember and give thanks for what they did for me and my family.

We do not have to earn our admittance into community. We need only bring ourselves, broken places and all, to claim our right to belong. The need to belong is primal, and expressed in all the world's religions. *We long to be* with others.

A true community will only ask of us what we can give it; will demand only that we be who we are. Over time, and as we are ready, encouraged by the people we let into our lives, a healthy community will ask us to learn and grow and change. Jayber Crow was a barber for his whole life in his community. He never married. But he did learn to let people in, to let them into his shop and, over time and almost without his having to decide to do so, which might have been too painful, into his life and his heart. And he was only who he was – ever – not anyone other than his own true self.

But as the years passed and friendships took root, and the usual struggles of human existence – of death and disaster and joy and delight – took place in that valley along the river, bonding people to place and to one another – this man's life grew more full. In all his days and in his mind and spirit, he felt a wholeness come near him, nearer ever than before, come into him and fill him, even as the river in that valley filled some winters until it ran clear over its banks. So too, is it here with us, in our own river valley, joined as we are in a living community that binds us one to another, with a

force as great as the pull of the river to the sea. So it is with us, here, in this community whose history is longer than memory, but whose story is still beginning.

Just as no one of us can stand long or well in isolation, regardless of our fear or pride, no community can stand forever looking inward. Our church, of Universalist heritage, now of Unitarian Universalist faith and hope, lives out its promise best when we look around, when we see across the human landscape for ways we can give back, for all we have received. We look first at all the faces we have learned to love here, and then we need to look beyond ourselves – look for our sisters and brothers, along this river valley and beyond, and invite them to come in. And even that is not enough, has never been enough.

For like all who truly belong, whose lives and spirits rise like the morning sun shining off the river, we need ever to look outward, far beyond the valley of our birth until we see, as wide and long as memory, as strong as the pull of the oldest story, that story still being written ... look until we see the whole world coming into community, until in all the rivers of all the lands across all the places of the earth, we see justice roll down like waters, and peace like an ever-flowing stream.

## **Reading for the time of meditation:**

We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been — a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats.

Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power.

Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free. - **Starhawk:**